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Hegel and Spinoza: Substance and Negativity

By Gregor Moder

Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017, pbk \$34.95 (ISBN 978-0-8101-3543-7), pp. 200

By Robb Dunphy

Perhaps the first thing to point out about this curious book is that its title is somewhat misleading. Anyone approaching it expecting a focused, comparative account of the work of Hegel and Spinoza on the subjects of metaphysics, logic, or even political philosophy will be to some extent disappointed. While these areas of inquiry are touched upon, the book primarily investigates relations between the 'Hegelian' and 'Spinozist' legacies in 20th century European thought, perhaps most overtly in the explicitly politically oriented 'materialisms' of thinkers like Althusser and Žižek.

The second thing to point out goes some way towards mitigating the misleading effect indicated by the first. Moder's title clearly recalls Pierre Macherey's 1979 work, *Hegel ou Spinoza*. Macherey's book likewise represents an intervention into the materialist theory of the time, although perhaps less explicitly so than Moder's. Macherey's account of Hegel's misreadings of Spinoza, and of Spinoza's purported incompatibility with Hegel's systematic thought, culminates in a rejection of the element of teleology present in some Hegelian Marxist accounts of socio-historical analysis. Here I am over-simplifying the matter somewhat. However, it does seem as though Macherey suggests that contemporary theorists and philosophers must choose which legacy to affirm: Hegelianism, with its teleology and idealism, or Spinozism as strict materialism, with its rejection of the notion of teleology. It is clear that Macherey leans heavily towards the latter.

As Mladen Dolar points out in his foreword (xi), Moder's book, without ignoring significant differences between both Hegel and Spinoza, and between the Hegelianisms and Spinozisms of the 20th century, is an attempt at a more inclusive approach. Specifically, Moder is interested in identifying commonalities between Spinozism and Hegelianism that can be occluded by the polemical opposing of these two intellectual legacies by thinkers like Macherey, and in the possibility that reading Hegel and Spinoza together (even if not always in harmony) might provide useful resources for considering issues at the heart of contemporary materialism, for example, the theory of ideology and the place of the idea of the negative.

There is clearly an important set of relations between scholarly interpretations of the positions of figures in the history of philosophy and interventions into contemporary philosophy where one finds thinkers laying claim to the inheritance of a particular intellectual legacy, even though they clearly depart in a number of significant ways from the forbear they choose to emphasise. There is also nothing inherently problematic about attempting some amount of both kinds of work in one book, or of developing work in the latter category on the basis of work done in the former, as Macherey did when he used his criticisms of Hegel's reading of Spinoza to motivate a rejection of certain 'Hegelian' tropes in the philosophy of his day. However, this kind of work requires that one be careful to indicate precisely where one is dealing with Hegel, say, and where one is dealing with contemporary self-described 'Hegelianisms' such as those of Žižek or Badiou. A problem running throughout Moder's book is that these waters are muddled.

I shall now give a rundown of the principal contents of the book. It does, however, seem important to note from the outset that it is frequently unclear, especially in Chapters 3-5

and in the Conclusion, whether Moder's focus is on Hegel and Spinoza, or on contemporary 'Hegelianisms' and 'Spinozisms'.

Moder's Introduction begins with a straightforward rehearsal of Spinoza's influence on Hegel's thought, Hegel's interpretations of what he took to be key Spinozist positions and principles, and the criticisms that Hegel levelled against Spinoza's philosophy on that basis. It also provides a brief but helpful account of some of the main ways in which it is common to think that Hegel misread or misrepresented Spinoza. This section then morphs into a discussion of Althusser's and Macherey's criticisms of Hegelian dialectics, with the interesting suggestion that both Hegel's critical attitude towards Spinoza and modern French Spinozist critical attitudes towards Hegel depend upon understanding their opponent as committed to a kind of Neoplatonist model of ontology (10-11). Moder agrees with Deleuze that it is a mistake to read Spinoza as a Neoplatonist, instead identifying a distinctive model of 'immanent causality' whereby the effect is not distinct from its cause (10). In addition, contra Althusser and Macherey, Moder argues that by understanding the Hegelian idea of 'absolute knowing' as analogous to a 'punctuation mark' at the end of a sentence, i.e., as that which gives meaning to what has gone before it rather than representing some substantive new content, he is able to claim that Hegel, in turn, is innocent of the charge of adhering to a teleological, 'inverted' Neoplatonism (13). This puts Moder in a position to reconsider what Hegelianism and Spinozism have to say about causality and teleology in the book without having to suppose that they are radically opposed: Hegelians to a pseudo-Spinozist idea of 'simple negation' (9) distinguishing substance from its modes, and Spinozists to a pseudo-Hegelian theological teleology (12).

Chapter 1 focusses on the beginning of Hegel's *Logic*. Moder offers a complex, even occasionally bewildering account of the relationship between the concepts of being and nothing that requires paying attention to 'the difference between to think and not to think' (22). The key interpretative move on Moder's part is to suggest that 'Logic begins by admitting its failing, by declaring its own incapacity to speak, and by doing so it nevertheless finds its own voice' (19). I see little in Hegel's *Logic* to suggest that he is committed to such an account of the beginning, so I am inclined to think that here as elsewhere Moder's quite creative reconstruction of what is going on in the text has less to do with understanding or evaluating Hegel's thought and more to do with the development of new concepts or positions relevant to interventions in contemporary theory. At the heart of the chapter is Moder's reconstruction of Hegel's comments to the effect that the nature of scientific inquiry is clarified only within scientific investigation as a commitment to an explicitly paradoxical notion of limit between what is internal and what is external to logic (28). Beyond what seems to me to be rather a forced imposition of this paradoxical concept of limit onto the Hegelian text, it is not obvious what this chapter is doing in Moder's book. If the comparison between Hegel and Spinoza is taking place at the level of metaphysics, then focusing only on the most indeterminate concepts of being, nothing and becoming would seem to tell us very little about Hegel's philosophical position. If it takes place at the level of an inquiry into how to begin, there is little presented here to suggest that Spinoza has a great deal to say on this topic. Indeed, the chapter is entitled *Hegel's Logic of Pure Being and Spinoza*, but the latter is almost entirely absent from it. He is mentioned briefly only four times by my count, and never in a context which suggests that he has much to add to the matter being discussed.

Chapter 2 reconstructs Hegel's critical attitude to the philosophy of (i) 'the Orient' (as Hegel understands it) (37-43); (ii) the Eleatics (44-48); (iii) Aristotle's notion of a primary cause (48-50), and (iv) Neoplatonist metaphysics (51-54). It then goes on to argue, as in the introduction, that it is a mistake to understand Spinoza's 'immanent causality' on any of

these models. This chapter is loosely connected to the first in that it acknowledges Hegel's suspect suggestion that we should expect to see the dialectical development of logic from its simplest account of being to its grasp of the concept or the idea proper mirrored to some extent in the history of philosophy (39). However, the key interpretative claim that Hegel misreads Spinoza, and that therefore there might be some non-dialectical account of causality and difference as championed by 20th century Spinozists like Deleuze, seems to have little to do with Hegel's curious attitude towards the history of philosophy. That said, having introduced the notion of a logical progression of history in building up to the claim about how Hegel gets Spinoza wrong, Moder is now in a position to interrogate the notion of teleology which has attracted so much anti-Hegelian ire. This is the central focus of the third chapter.

This third chapter is, however, for the most part not an interrogation of the notion of teleology in Hegel's work. Instead, we find an attempt to rehabilitate a less metaphysically or politically objectionable version of this notion by way of a detour through, first, Žižek and Gadamer, who discuss the notion of an origin as a paradoxical kind of limit encountered already in Chapter 1 (59-62) and the notion of subjectivity (62-66). Moder then continues with sections on Heidegger and 'the fourfold' (69-71) and Brentanian geometry (71-75) before finally arriving back at Hegel, armed presumably with an improved account of teleology which, if read into him, can save him or Hegelian Marxism from critics like Althusser and Macherey. It would be fruitless to try to give an account of what goes on in the sections listed above, but the vital point seems to be Moder's insistence upon the notion of a telos as a punctuation mark – something that the process leading up to it is undeniably building towards, but which, rather than representing a substantive outcome, refers us back to the meaning of what has gone before and allows us to comprehend it. Moder also generously yet questionably attributes to Hegel the view that his own tendency to view the history of philosophy as culminating in some sense in his own work is, in fact, nothing but a 'gesture' (78), put forward in such a way as to remain fundamentally aware that it is in fact not the final word on the matter but another fallible step in an ongoing philosophical conversation.

Spinoza is once again mostly absent from Chapter 3 but pops up mid-way through to emphasise the importance of noting two different ways of conceptualising Moder's idea of a metaphysical punctuation mark. Or, put differently, two different accounts of the motif of the negative, which Moder's quasi-Hegelian analyses of the notions of limit and of teleology have led him to assert as essential to the notion of substance or being. These two models are that of the 'gap' or lack and 'torsion' or curvature (65). The former will be familiar to readers acquainted with Žižek's highly Lacanian reinterpretation of Hegel. The latter, Moder suggests slightly mysteriously, is the idea that 'boundary is all there ever was and that existence is a function of that delimitation line' (63). What seems to be important to Moder is that this account of the negative might be compatible with Spinoza's thought in a way that Žižek's talk of a gap or lack in substance could never be. The claim that Spinozism is able to think a kind of negativity is a good example of Moder's attempt to read (a certain) Spinoza and (a certain) Hegel together.

Chapter 4 takes an interesting left turn through discussions of death, comedy, and negativity in Hegel and Spinoza, but equally in the work of recent thinkers who make use of the former two, including Malabou, Župančič, Deleuze, Negri, Althusser, Macherey and various others. I will not attempt to retrace Moder's steps here, but the end result of this chapter is an attempt to locate the possibility of a kind of negativity within Spinoza's own apparently purely affirmationist model of thought, and of substance. There is much that is interesting in this chapter, and it ties together important material from earlier in the text. For instance, Moder argues for a conception of Spinozist substance which is fundamentally 'in

relation with itself' (99) in such a way as to constitute something like the kind of negativity as torsion to which he had alluded earlier, and further that this Spinozism might even be compatible with the kind of teleological thinking gestured at in Chapter 3, notwithstanding Spinoza's apparently overt hostility to the notion of a final cause (101).

The final chapter provides a reading of Althusser on the basis of the less-incompatible-than-previously-thought Hegelian and Spinozist motifs Moder has developed so far in the work. This is perhaps the most concentrated engagement with a single figure in the book, and it is curious that it is neither Spinoza nor Hegel. Moder might respond by saying that it is, in fact, both, because 'Althusser is the incarnation of the problem that we have decided to call the problem of Hegel and Spinoza' (120). The engagement with Althusser ranges over the nature of materialism, the theory of ideology, and the relation between theory and practice. Despite acknowledging Althusser's pronouncements of his own Spinozism (105) and his occasional hostility to Hegel (116), Moder claims to find evidence in his work of both 'conceptions of negativity ... at work simultaneously at all times' (120): the Žižekian-Hegelian conception of lack and Moder's proposed Spinozist conception of torsion.

Finally, Moder suggests that his renewed Hegelian and Spinozist Althusser is indicative of the possibilities for making progress in the type of debates typified, for example, by 'controversies between contemporary Deleuzians and contemporary Lacanians' insofar as these have been conducted 'without an explicit understanding of the proximity and the distance between their fundamental theses' (124). He finishes the book by considering a number of potential objections to contemporary Spinozism, and his suggestions for how to respond tend to lean again towards the importance of adopting a certain Hegelianism or insisting on locating a certain kind of 'punctuation mark' in Spinozist materialism (139-145).

The first chapter of the book provides a good indication of Moder's style. It is a curious mix of relatively accessible analogies (e.g. absolute knowing as a 'punctuation mark') and what seem like deliberately esoteric expressions which do not receive sufficient explanation, for instance, 'The beginning with thinking is only possible because – from the perspective of its result – it includes not-thinking as its not-beginning' (25). It is still not clear to me that this sentence says anything useful about either Hegel's Logic or its legacy in contemporary philosophy. This chapter also exhibits another feature of Moder's book that I found frustrating. While it purports to be an investigation into an issue between the philosophies of Hegel and Spinoza, it is often bizarrely devoid of engagement with the voluminous secondary literature which exists on the topics with which it engages. Beyond acknowledging several influential yet somewhat dated works by Gadamer and Henrich, Moder shows almost no interest in the large body of work which exists on the issues surrounding the beginning of Hegel's Logic, despite devoting an entire chapter to the topic. This chapter, as in other places in the book, feels problematically unscholarly. Instead, Moder focuses his attention on a creative re-imagining of the topic, the possible value of which is undermined to some extent by the obscurity of his presentation. He also has a tendency to attempt to mitigate the complexity of his writing, not with sustained, clear explanation, but with attempts at humour. It is in this vein that he opens the first chapter with a light-hearted anecdote about Jacques Chirac's response to Eastern European support for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, all so that he can arrive at a line about the beginning of Hegel's Logic being 'a missed opportunity to keep quiet' (16). I did not feel that this was in any way helpful.

Despite stylistic issues, worries about obscurity, an occasional lack of scholarship, and the potential disappointment that will be experienced by any reader wanting a serious study of the philosophy of Hegel and Spinoza outside the arena of contemporary

European or continental philosophy, there is material that is original and interesting in Moder's relatively short book. To reiterate, there is absolutely no doubt that it must be read as an intervention into the uses and misuses of Hegel and Spinoza in 20th and 21st century European materialism, even if Moder does not always make it sufficiently clear that this is what he is up to. That said, for readers heavily invested in work by the likes of Deleuze, Althusser, and Žižek there will be much here that is provocative and demanding of a response. At times, the brevity of the book feels very much as though it is the first word in such a conversation. This is visible, for instance, in the way that Moder hops from one topic to the next in Chapter 3, making significant claims without always supporting them with detailed argumentation. This contributes to the sense that the book is a series of explorations into things Moder happens to be interested in, rather than exhibiting a coherent overall structure or arguing towards much in the way of firm conclusions, though this is not necessarily a criticism.

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